

## **Youth critical in unlocking Kenya's growth potential**

**By Ken Mwigie**

Countries like Kenya, which have a relatively youthful population, stand on the runway of economic take-off if they find the correct formula to harness the energy, creativity and entrepreneurship that young people have to offer. The youth are an economic force that can both drive and create demand for goods and services especially due to the growing digital economy.

However, even with this major advantage, these countries also face the attendant risk of ensuring that their youths do not fall prey to political machinations that can turn them into dynamite especially in the run-up to general elections. How then can Kenya position itself to benefit from its youthful demographic while avoiding the potential political pitfall?

One of the answers is to be found in the government's Big Four Agenda. When the government invests directly or facilitates investment in attaining food security, building affordable homes, accelerating manufacturing and ensuring affordable healthcare, young people are in direct line to benefit from these investments. All these are youth-facing investments. Creating jobs through manufacturing will create demand for food and housing, and once the young people start families on account of having disposable incomes, they will automatically require healthcare that meets the needs of their households and those of their dependants.

My view, however, is that for Kenya's youth to benefit from the Big Four Agenda and other investments in infrastructure development, we will need to inculcate a culture of self-dependency in a critical mass of the youth demographic. There needs to be a shift from the historical socialisation of young people that education will position them to get well-paying jobs. Now, more and more, we need to make them understand that education ought to prepare them to create jobs by harnessing their creativity, starting with small start-ups that the government and its agencies can hand-hold to achieve scale. Secondly, we need to teach young people that what they call 'talent' can be monetised and professionalised to make it profitable for them to engage in the activities they are passionate about, be it acting, music or sports.

Without a doubt, the policies and systems put in place to encourage young people to take this route hold a lot of promise were their broad goals to become self-evident to the intended beneficiaries. This, however, calls for training of the youth at all levels, starting at the grassroots, so that they can gather the courage to chart out a path different from the one their parents walked. We need to disabuse them of the idea that one has to tarmac for a job, work till the age of 60 and then retire in the village. That model is no longer applicable in the modern economy. The future of work means that the people starting out on a small scale today can grow their enterprises to a point where they can become self-sustaining and professionally run businesses that create jobs for their founders and for others as well. This is why policy interventions are important.

Studies conducted in rural Kenya have shown that when women or youth groups are trained in basic business management, better packaging of their produce and are then connected with a market for their goods, the profitability of such groups increases, leading to the ripple effect of higher incomes for members and better quality of life for their families. This is a model that can be scaled across the country.

For the model to work, however, we will need to invest in the mental retooling of young people so that they can be socialised to embrace skill- and knowledge-based jobs going into

the future. That is where the investments that the government has put in in reviving technical and vocational colleges will pay off in the short and medium term. This, coupled with the incentives offered for youth enterprises ought to start bearing fruit as Kenya marches steadily towards achieving its Vision 2030 goals.

It is worth reminding Kenyans that the goals envisioned in this national blueprint are not an event. Rather, they are a journey, and every step we take individually and collectively helps us as a country to walk that journey together. At the end of it, the hope is to create a country that is progressive and cohesive and that creates opportunities for self-advancement for all citizens irrespective of where they come from. The second aim is to create industrial hubs across the country to harness resources like leather and agricultural produce. This is why we must constantly work at strengthening devolution so that every county can become as vibrant as the next.

This also calls for greater synergy between the national and county governments so that they collaborate in meeting the infrastructure and policies that will spur investments and open up the country for growth. Only in this way will we progressively create a country in which the young people, indeed all citizens, feel confident to live, work and invest in any part of the country.

**Mr Mwige is the Director-General of the Vision 2030 Delivery Secretariat.**